

The Coca-Cola Killings;□ Is Plan Colombia funding a bloodbath of union activists? The American Prospect

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By David Bacon, who writes on immigration and labor issues, is an associate editor for Pacific News Service, which has published a different version of this story.

AFTER THE LEADER OF their union was shot down at their plant gate in late 1996, Edgar Paez and his co-workers at the Coca-Cola bottling factory in Carepa, Colombia, tried for more than four years to get their government to take action against the responsible parties. Instead, some of the workers themselves wound up behind bars, while the murderers went free.

Convinced that Colombian officials were unable or unwilling to bring the perpetrators to justice, they decided to go abroad for help. Accordingly, last July, the Colombian union Sinaltrainal, together with the United Steelworkers of America and the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF), filed a lawsuit in the Florida courts against Coca-Cola, Panamerican Beverages (the largest soft-drink bottler in Latin America), and Bebidas y Alimentos (owned by Richard Kirby of Key Biscayne, Florida), which operates the Carepa plant. The suit charges the three companies with complicity in the assassination of the union leader Isidro Segundo Gil.

The case has become the centerpiece in a new strategy devised by Colombia's labor movement to stop a wave of murders of union activists that's lasted over a decade. International labor cooperation, the unions believe, is the only means left to them to counter the power of the corporations that they think are the instigators and beneficiaries of the repression. Increasingly, U.S.-based unions have been willing to help. On November 19, Paez was joined by Teamsters President James P. Hoffa in front of the World of Coca-Cola Museum in Atlanta, where Hoffa proclaimed: "As the union that represents the most Coca-Cola workers in the world, we demand that Coke stop the violence against workers."

The level of violence against Colombian unionists is staggering: In 2000, assassinations took the lives of 153 of the nation's trade-union leaders. In 2001, the figure had reached 143 by the end of November. According to Hector Fajardo, general secretary of the United Confederation of Workers (CUT), Colombia's largest union federation, 3,800 trade unionists have been assassinated in Colombia since 1986. In the year 2000, three out of every five trade unionists killed in the world were Colombian, according to a recent report by the United Steelworkers.

LAST SPRING, TWO LEADERS OF A union at the U.S.-owned Drummond coal mine, Valmore Locarno Rodriguez and Victor Hugo Orcasita, were killed in an incident that eventually drew worldwide condemnation. Media attention, however, didn't prevent the subsequent murder of Gustavo Soler Mora, another leader of the union in the same area in October.

Unionists and human-rights activists hold Colombia's paramilitary forces responsible for almost all the trade-union assassinations -- though those forces aren't working simply for themselves. Robin Kirk, who monitors abuses in Colombia for Human Rights Watch, says that there are strong ties between the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), the nation's leading paramilitary grouping, and the Colombian military. "The Colombian military and intelligence apparatus has been virulently anticommunist since the 1950s," she says, "and they look at trade unionists as subversives -- as a very real and potential threat." Roberto Molino of the Colombian Commission of Jurists contends that "in the case of the paramilitaries, you cannot underestimate the collaboration of government forces." Those forces, says Samuel Morales of the CUT, "believe it's a crime to try to present any option for social change."

The AUC is also quietly backed by elements of the nation's business and economic elite. "There are powerful economic interests that support the paramilitaries," Kirk says, "and they attack union leaders again and again." Morales concurs: "The paramilitaries are an armed wing of the same military forces and government structures that have historically taken positions against us. In Colombia, they're called the army's 'sixth division.'"

According to the complaint in the Florida case, here's what happened: At 8:30 A.M. on December 5, 1996, a right-wing paramilitary squad of the AUC showed up at the gate of the Coke bottling plant in Carepa. Gil, a member of the union's executive board, went to see what they wanted. The paras opened fire on Gil and he dropped to the ground, mortally wounded. An hour after he was assassinated, paramilitary forces kidnapped another leader of the union at his home; he managed to escape, however, and fled to Bogota. At 8:00 P.M., paras broke into the union's offices, destroyed the equipment there, and burned down the entire house, destroying all the union's records.

The next day, the heavily armed group went inside the bottling plant, called the workers together, and gave them until 4:00 P.M. to resign from the union. "They said that if they didn't resign, the same thing would happen to them that happened to Gil -- they would be killed," recalls Paez, who visited the United States in November to ask union members here to support the suit. Not surprisingly, union members resigned en masse. A number of workers also quit their jobs outright, undoubtedly fearing that they would be killed simply for showing up.

The companies, meanwhile, disclaim all responsibility for the violence and coercion. Coca-Cola spokesperson Rafael Fernandez asserts that Coke has a code of conduct requiring respect for human rights. Coke's Colombia mouthpiece, Pablo Largacha, insists that "bottlers in Colombia are completely independent of the Coca-Cola Company." The bottler, Bebidas y Alimentos, says it had no way to stop the paramilitaries from doing whatever they wanted -- after all, they had guns. "You don't use them, they use you," owner Kirby told a reporter. "Nobody tells the paramilitaries what to do."

But the suit charges that plant manager Ariosto Milan Mosquera claimed that "he had given an order to the paramilitaries to carry out the task of destroying the union." Workers believed him because he had a history of partying with the paramilitaries.

Paez says not only that the plant's managers were responsible for what happened but that

Coke clearly benefited from it. "At the time of Gil's death, we were involved in negotiations with the company [Bebidas], presenting proposals to them," he says. "The company never negotiated with the union after that. Twenty-seven workers in 12 departments left the plant and the area. All the workers had to quit the union to save their own lives, and the union was completely destroyed. For two months, the paramilitaries camped just outside the plant gate. Coca-Cola never complained to the authorities." The experienced workers who left the plant, who'd been earning between \$ 380 and \$ 400 a month, were replaced by new employees at minimum wage -- \$ 130 a month.

During a subsequent investigation by the Colombian Justice Ministry, the plant's director and production manager were detained, along with a local paramilitary leader. All three were later released, with no charges filed against them.

The assassinations were neither the first nor the last targeted at union leaders in Colombian Coke plants. In 1994, two other union activists, Jose David and Luis Granado, were also murdered in Carepa, and at that time as well, paramilitaries demanded that workers quit the union. In 1989, unionist Jose Avelino Chicano was killed in Coca-Cola's Pasto plant. This year, again during negotiations, a union leader at the Bucaramanga plant, Oscar Dario Soto Polo, was murdered. When the union denounced the killings, the plant's chief of security charged its leaders with terrorism and rebellion. Five were arrested and jailed for six months.

THE PARAMILITARY WAR ON unionists is escalating at a time when U.S. aid to Colombia's official armed forces has also grown rapidly. Under Plan Colombia, the U.S. effort to reduce the flow of illegal drugs from Colombia, the United States has funneled \$ 1.3 billion into the country, almost entirely in military assistance. Colombia is the third-largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the world, and several members of Congress have tried to call attention to the possibility that some of our aid may be funding the anti-union bloodbath. "Deaths due to political violence [have] roughly doubled from previous years," Massachusetts Democrat John F. Tierney told fellow House members in early July. "These are innocent people trying to make Colombia a safer and more prosperous place." Democratic Representative Jan Schakowsky of Illinois concluded that "cutting funds from the Colombian military makes sense. This is a military that has repeatedly been implicated in the brutalization and murder of the very people that it is supposed to protect."

The Colombian government views union activity as a threat because it challenges its basic economic policies. The administration of President Andres Pastrana is under intense pressure from the International Monetary Fund to cut its public-sector budget, in part through privatizing public services. Union leaders who oppose privatization have also been targeted for extinction. After leading a fight to maintain public service in the city of Calf, Carlos Eliecer Prado, a public-sector union leader, was murdered in May.

This spring, the United Steelworkers sent a formal delegation to Colombia in the wake of the murders of the union leaders at the Drummond mine. The delegation met with leaders of the CUT, after which the two unions joined with the ILRF to file the complaint against Coca-Cola and its bottlers.

One stated objective of the suit is to build pressure on the Colombian and U.S. governments to comply with rights guaranteed unions and workers under the conventions of the International Labor Organization and the Geneva Accords on human rights. But Colombian unions would also like to see those responsible for the murders brought to justice.

"We want to strip off the mask hiding the involvement of transnational corporations in our internal conflict," Paez explains. "To do this, we need a judicial forum outside the country, since within Colombia those guilty of these crimes are treated with impunity. In this particular case, those responsible include Coca-Cola. But they're not the only company pursuing policies that violate human rights. By strengthening our ties with the Steelworkers and the AFL-CIO, we're creating our own global answer to the globalization of the corporations."